



Yankus melds traditional and digital photo techniques into a sensual, evocative whole.

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By Nate Lippens

Beauty is never a dirty word for Marc Yankus. Nor is time. His photographs, on display in a solo show at Photographic Center Northwest, combine traditional and digital techniques for an aesthetic rooted in sensuality. It also employs the oldest and most reliable of all artistic tropes: memory. His may be a familiar sensuality because his commercial work has been featured in national magazines, such as Harper's and Atlantic Monthly, as book covers for Salman Rushdie and Philip Roth, and as posters for Broadway shows.

The images in this exhibition are his fine art, but they also reflect how much Yankus blurs the distinction. His vibrant and tactile images — a mix of realistic portraits of mostly young men, interspersed with impressionistic landscapes and locations — bring one into a dream world created by the artist out of his experiences, both real and fictive. The passage of time, the accumulation of memories and the slippage between dailiness and imagination are active in his pigment prints. The photographs have the saturated color and the look of Philip Lorca diCorcia's portraiture mixed with some of the altering impulses of the Starn Brothers' scratched and marred early work. Of course, in Yankus' work, the alterations aren't taken to the extremes of defacement, but are instead used as layering effects. Using a computer program, he overlays many of his images with textures scanned from old books and tintypes that give the photos a strange patina.

The places are the dreamier of the two strands of his work. Architectural impermanence crops up in his landscape and cityscapes, especially "Two Towers, 2004," "Red Building, 2002" and "Sheridan Square at Night, 2002." Luridly shot night scenes reveal buildings that look like craggy ruins against the skyline, lit from within as if by fire. His other New York-centric works map a city that may never have existed except in old newsreels and the dreams of Midwesterners bent on escape to a mythic Manhattan that vanished as soon as they stepped off the Greyhound.

His portraits of boys and young men have much in common with Rineke Dijkstra's work. "James Running, 1999," "German Boy Looking, 2002," "Aaron, sheet on shoulder, 2005" are all evocative and enigmatic photographs that employ a calculated theatricality. They also demonstrate that he is fluent in the language of the Boston School of photographers, such as Jack Pierson, Nan Goldin, David Armstrong and, most especially, Mark Morrisroe, who died in 1989 from AIDS at the age of 30. Morrisroe messed continuously with focus, blurring and painterly techniques.

Yankus' images are not acutely personal in the sense that Goldin's are or conceptual exercises in the mode of diCorcia. They are closer to the projection that Pierson captured in his monograph "Every Single One of Them" and in the ruthlessly honest quote of celebrity photographer Bruce Weber, who said, "We sometimes photograph the things we can never be."

Yankus moves this impulse beyond erotic projection onto dewy youth into more vague and fraught territory: memory. His smudgy urban landscapes, the clouds above his father's house, industrial sites with infants playing in them, foreigners, and the steady appraising gaze returned by many of his subjects are all part of experienced memories and, even more longingly, abstracted memories — those that slipped away, the missed opportunities, the secondhand accounts of lost weekends. The texture of thick paper that wavers behind buildings remind one of the diaristic narratives never kept. Even the blank page holds promise and, just as easily, regret.